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Gettier's Second Counterexample

According the traditional analysis of knowledge, knowledge of a proposition has three necessary conditions of belief, truth, and justification, which are together jointly sufficient for knowledge. In this paper I am going to quickly discuss this traditional conception of knowledge, and what it means to say that its conditions are necessary and jointly sufficient for knowledge. I will also discuss Edmund Gettier's second counterexample to the traditional conception.

The traditional conception of knowledge claims that for a person to have knowledge of a proposition, three conditions must be met necessarily. The person must believe in the proposition, the proposition must be true, and the person must have justification for believing the proposition. According to the traditional sense, if any of these conditions are not met, the subject can not be said to have knowledge. This is the meaning of saying that all three conditions are necessary for the result.

The traditional conception also claims that the three conditions already presented are sufficient for knowledge, which is to say that if all three conditions are met then the subject can be said to have knowledge; no more is needed. Claiming that a set of conditions is sufficient is equivalent to claiming that all of the necessary conditions are contained within it.

So, given a claim that a certain set of conditions are both all individually necessary and jointly sufficient for some result (as we have with the traditional conception of knowledge), how would one go about proving that claim false? There are two essential ways to do this. One could show an example where all of the conditions have been met, and yet the do not reach the result (arguing against the sufficiency of the conditions.) Alternatively, one could show an example where the result is reached and one of the

conditions has not been met (arguing against the necessity of one of the conditions.) Either of these would prove the claim false.

Edmund Gettier used two examples which proved false the traditional conception of knowledge (considering the weak form of justification for the third condition) by arguing against its sufficiency. The second example given has to do with a person named Smith's belief in a series of propositions. First, Smith believes that one of his friends, Jones, owns a Ford and Smith is justified in this belief (he sees Jones driving a Ford.) Second, Smith has another friend named Brown, and Smith has no idea where Brown is. Nevertheless, because of Smith's justified belief in Jones driving a Ford, he is also logically justified in believing the proposition that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona (as well as several other propositions of the same nature.) The justification is transferred from the first proposition to the second (the disjunction) by means of the principle of deductive closure.

It so happens, however, than Jones does not own a Ford, but Brown is indeed in Barcelona. Thus, the resulting disjunction is true (by the rule of addition and the fact that Brown is in Barcelona). Also, Smith has justification in the disjunction, and he believes the disjunction. However, even though this means that Smith has met all of the allegedly necessary conditions for knowledge, he still does not have knowledge.

And so, by showing a counterexample to the sufficiency claim of the traditional conception of knowledge, Gettier has shown the traditional conception false. The three conditions stated by the traditional conception as sufficient for knowledge are in fact not sufficient, even though they might still all be necessary. It seems that if the weak form of justification is used, there must be another necessary condition added to make the traditional conception of knowledge complete.